

## STOLEN HORSES

Lcags so lhun 'grub ལཱ་གསལ་སྤྱོད་ལྷན་པུ་བླ་མ་གྱི་ལྷན་པུ་བླ་མ་  
(Klu sgrub ལྷ་སྤྱོད་ལྷན་པུ་བླ་མ་)

Our head teacher concluded class, assigned homework for the holiday, and then counted the students diligently. As soon as we were dismissed we ran to the school gate, like a flood rushes to the valley. I was the fastest among the students. At the gate, I turned and waited for the next student. I counted who was second, third, and so on. In fact, I could only count from one to twenty when I was nine so I quickly lost interest.

It was around six PM on a summer day in 2003 when I headed home on foot alone. We live in a tent in summer and my home was about four hours away on the grassland in Gad dmar.

By the time the sun half-hid behind a mountain, I was still walking, passing valley after valley. No one else was in sight. The land was as empty as a boundless ocean. Imagining that there might be some wild animals waiting to attack me, I recalled Mother's saying, "When you are going somewhere, don't forget to chant scriptures."

I began chanting as loudly as possible. I saw no wildlife.

I reached the winter pasture at nine PM.

The sky was wrapped in darkness. I was terribly afraid of storms when I was a child. I wanted to stay in our winter house, but it was vacant in summer. I lacked courage. I then started for the summer pasture.

Darkness surrounded me.

I heard water flowing in streams. It seemed like another dark world dominated by birds making strange sounds. Later, I learned that these birds make that sound every night at the same time. Thousands of birds don't like the night, and sleep, but that bird is different.

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Eventually I reached the group of tents my family was part of. Solar electricity panel light inside the tents made them resemble patches of stars in the sky. The dogs discovered me and began barking ferociously. My heart beat faster as I passed the tents one by one. My family tent was third from the top.

Sheep surrounded the yaks. Most yaks were sleeping. Some chewed their cuds. My family dog saw me, barked, and then stopped. It seemed to recognize me.

Father came out of the tent with a flashlight to see why our dog was barking. I coughed so Father would hear. He shouted "Lhu b+ha? and then shouted into the tent, "Hey! Son is coming!"

All my family members came outside. They were glad to see me and asked if I was afraid on such a dark night. My two sisters, Brother, and my parents were there. It was now about ten o'clock. They were just having dinner.

Father asked, "How about your school life? How is the school food?"

I reported that I was doing well in school and the food was good. He nodded skeptically and told Mother to give me some mutton. "I understand there is little meat in the school food," he said.

He was right. Indeed, there was little meat in the school food, but I did not say so because my parents would worry about me. Mother gave us all as much food as we wanted. After a great meal, we prepared to go to bed.

Father and I lay on the *hu tse* together. Mother took food to our black dog. She quickly came back and called Father, "Hey! Come! Our horses are gone!"

"They must have been stolen. Sgrol kho, get my rifle," Father said, pulling on his robe. The weather was cooler and windy. A storm was brewing.

"Take Rin chen tshe ring with you, otherwise, we will worry about you out there are all alone," Mother urged.

I hoped Father would take Brother with him, but he worried that Brother would get sick in the cold, wet weather and refused.

I stood in front of our tent and watched Father walk away, looking for a horse to borrow. I desperately wanted to be strong enough to help him. I despised my weak self and vowed that I would become a hero who would protect our family property.

Father soon returned with a white horse and called Mother to bring a saddle and hold the horse's reins. As Mother handed the saddle to Father she murmured. "Take care! Horses are important, but your well-being is everything."

Although I was just a little boy, I understood the difficulty of being a man without brothers and sisters. I knew Father's life was littered with many sad experiences.

And then Father suddenly was gone, like a butterfly in the boundless, limitless darkness with only the decreasing clatter of his horse's hooves testifying to his departure.

That night passed as slowly as a tortoise crawls. It started pouring. Mother didn't sleep. Her fingers counted her string of prayer beads hundreds of times as she quietly chanted. Meanwhile my sisters were immersed in their dreams.

Brother lay on his back, staring at the top of the tent.

I listened to the rain.

We silently waited for Father, thinking about nothing else.

Later, the rain let up and became gentle enough for a honeybee to fly. We continued waiting. Silence clutched our tent. Dogs barked vividly sometimes. Some young men had surrounded a girl's tent. I went out hoping to see a ray from Father's flashlight. The young men searching for girls sang love songs, and whistled. Then I saw Father returning. He was on a mountaintop. I jumped up happily and called Mother. We made a fire in the stove before he arrived.

Father returned and said, "Our horses were stolen by two men from the east. I saw their tracks in the mud, but I didn't catch up with them. Maybe they are from A mchog (Gansu Province). In 'Bo ra Village, men steal to show their courage. It won't be easy to get our horses back. I'll go to Rong bo Monastery and consult our *bla ma* tomorrow. Sgrol kho! You take care of our livestock and make sure

Rin chen tshe ring herds the sheep well. Now we should sleep. I have a long journey tomorrow."

Mother got up at the first sound of a sparrow the next morning. She tried to make a fire in our adobe stove but could not. The fuel was sodden from the rain. Murmuring she tied a sash around her tattered robe, and hurried to a neighbor's tent to get some smoldering dung.

I drifted between consciousness and dreams. Still, I could sense the slight odor of smoke from the wet wood Mother had tried to set afire.

The bandits' attack continued to make me deeply uncomfortable.

Father got up after a bit and exited the tent. I didn't know where he went. I guessed he went to borrow a horse to hurry to the township town before the bus left for Rong bo.

I stayed in bed a bit longer and then completely woke. My continuing sense of anxiety pulled me from my pillow.

"You should sleep till after I finish milking," suggested Mother. She had returned with a big metal dipper full of smoldering yak dung.

I stepped outside and noticed the clouds lifting above our tent and our neighbors' tents. The whole world of that valley was slowly coming awake, silently and gently.

Father soon returned, riding a horse he had borrowed from one of my aunts. Mother prepared some dried cheese and butter to give the *bla ma*. A kettle of milk tea began nosily boiling.

After breakfast Father rode off. I stood by the tent door and watched his figure steadily diminishing, a white bag with his gifts strapped to his back.

Mother finished milking, handed the pail of milk to me, and then untied the yaks.

Several older, neighboring men came to our tent and asked Mother details of the theft. Soon, more of our community members came, asking if we needed help in searching for the horses.

"We need to chant scriptures and offer a big incense offering. This is what a local tantric specialist advised last time this happened," suggested Mother.

Our visitors helped us make the incense materials and chanted scriptures while offering the incense. Meanwhile, some women helped Mother fry bread, boil tea and mutton, and cook noodles with onion and mutton for the helpers. At about two PM, the helpers ate meat, noodles, fried bread, yogurt, and sipped tea.

During lunch, an elder said, "Thieves can't steal the livestock they want only because of our deities' protection. Even if they do steal, nothing good will come to them. Years ago, some of our yaks were stolen and then many unpleasant things happened to the thieves as they were driving the yaks to their home. Several of the yaks charged the thieves, stood on their hind legs, and bellowed in strange ways, displaying our mountain deity's anger."

I totally believed this and was amazed

Two of my maternal uncles went to Bla brang Monastery after lunch to talk to some of their friends there, to see if they had any suggestions. Other visitors also left.

My family offered more *bsang* and invited two tantric specialists to chant scriptures.

Father returned the next day and said that he had consulted our great *bla ma* who advised, "Don't spend much effort on searching for the horses. My divination says the horses may come back home on their own."

Having talked to their contacts at Bla brang, my uncles returned, and reported, "The thieves are from 'Bo ra Village in A mchog. Once your property is stolen by men from 'Bo ra, it is not cheap to recover whatever was taken. They customarily do not return what they have stolen without substantial payment."

I turned to Father and said, "Why don't we catch the thieves if we know who they are?"

"We never know who the thief really is. The thief gives information to someone that we contact. That go-between never tells

who the thief is. He also may not know, but we can negotiate about payment through the go-between."

When the locals learned more about my family's missing horses, many came and offered to help. There was little we thought we could do other than beseech the deities for help. Meanwhile, Father went to A mchog and learned that the thieves were demanding 3,000 RMB per horse, which was very near the cash value of the horses. Father loved the horses and was prepared to pay, but our relatives didn't agree.

Time passed and my family accepted our loss. We decided to relinquish our anger and sense of loss.

Very unexpectedly about ten days later, our horses were back in their enclosure with pieces of broken white rope around their neck.

Mother cried, "Our *bla ma* watches over us!"

#### NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'bo ra འབོ་ར།

a mchog ཨ་མཚོག་

bla brang བླ་བྲང་

bla ma བླ་མ།

bsang བསང་

Gansu 甘肅

hu tse ཁུ་ཙེ།

klu sgrub ཀླུ་སྒྲུབ།

lcags so lhun' grub ལྷགས་སོ་ལུན་འགྲུབ།

lhu b+ha ལུ་བ་མ།

rin chen tshe ring རིན་ཆེན་ཆེ་རིང་།

rong bo རོང་བོ།

sgrol kho སྒོལ་ཁོ།